

Imprisonment and deportation of Iraqi refugees in Lebanon

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A non-signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, Lebanon does not grant refugee status to Iraqis, many of whom end up spending long periods of time in detention.

The lack of legal status for Iraqi refugees in Lebanon has a variety of unwelcome consequences. For example, if they find themselves exploited or abused – by employers or landlords – they are unable to approach the legal authorities to file a complaint. Moreover, under article 32 of Lebanon's 1962 law regulating the entry of foreigners into Lebanon, their stay and their exit from Lebanon, foreigners entering Lebanese territory illegally are liable to imprisonment (from one month to three years), fines and deportation. For Iraqi refugees, if they are arrested and proved to be there illegally, they are liable to the same punishments, treated as criminals, not as refugees.

UNHCR (the UN Refugee Agency) can grant theoretical legitimacy to Iraqis by registering them as refugees and providing a document which confirms that the bearer of the document has been accepted by UNHCR as a refugee. But as Lebanon has not signed the 1951 Refugee Convention, it does not consider itself bound by this designation. When a UNHCR-registered refugee is imprisoned on charges of illegal stay, UNHCR tries to persuade Lebanese officials to recognise the individual as a refugee, and also regularly visits the Iraqi in prison. All detained Iraqis are eligible to register with UNHCR if they have not already done so.

As an Iraqi I worked as a volunteer in a humanitarian organisation helping other displaced Iraqis in Lebanon but someone notified the authorities, telling them that I was working for money, rather than as a volunteer. The authorities gave me 15 days to leave and told me I could not return for five years. I could not risk death by returning to Iraq so now I move from house to house, always in fear. I have come to know the reality

of living illegally, with no right of residency, at risk of imprisonment at any minute.

I, my friends and thousands of other Iraqi refugees are in constant fear of arrest and detention. Some try to remain unnoticed by refraining from work while others, who do work illegally, face exploitation in the workplace but are unable to approach the authorities to file a complaint.

Ahmad, a 23-year-old Iraqi refugee in Lebanon, was arrested at a security checkpoint and imprisoned for one month – which was extended to six or seven months, and then for a further six months. Eventually UNHCR took up his case and was able to secure him temporary refugee status in Lebanon. Ahmad's story is one of hundreds of stories of Iraqis in this miserable situation.

UNHCR estimated that there were more 500 Iraqi refugees detained in Lebanese prisons in 2015. Once Iraqis have completed their prison sentences for staying illegally, Lebanon is obliged under international law not to deport them by force to a place where their lives are at risk; however, rather than releasing them, the authorities usually continue to keep them detained indefinitely. UNHCR is only able to help in the release of a very small number of them; the majority only gain their release by agreeing to return to Iraq.

Even if Lebanon is not bound to help and support refugees by giving them the opportunity to integrate into local society, Lebanon is nevertheless required to respect fundamental human rights; they could in addition provide temporary work permits renewable until it is safe for Iraqis to return to Iraq.

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